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## Why phenomenology is increasingly relevant to nurse researchers

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## Why phenomenology is increasingly relevant to nurse researchers

### Abstract

When nurse researchers contemplate designing a study they spend time, or at least they should, considering the ways in which epistemological assumptions inform their choice of methodology (Polit and Beck 2012). Pratt (2012) suggests that to understand the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of a research approach takes time, effort, commitment and total immersion on the part of the researcher. Once chosen, the right methodology for framing inquiry in nursing will guide the approaches used to collect data and conduct rigorous analysis.

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## **Why phenomenology is increasingly relevant to nurse researchers.**

Lorna Moxham & Christopher Patterson

When nurse researchers contemplate designing a study they spend time considering the ways in which epistemological assumptions inform their choice of methodology (Polit & Beck, 2012). Pratt (2012) suggests that to understand the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of a research approach takes time, effort, commitment and total immersion on the part of the researcher. Once chosen, the right methodology for framing inquiry in nursing will guide the approaches used to collect data and conduct rigorous analysis.

Within nursing and as a result of the breadth and depth of so many discipline areas, specialist practice domains and topics of interest within our profession, any number of methodologies are being used. There are literally, so many methodologies and so much choice. Given the diverse nature of nursing inquiry, methodologies can be drawn from the quantitative positivistic paradigm or the qualitative domain or subsume a mixed methods approach. This issue of *Nurse Researcher* includes three themed papers, each with a focus on the qualitative methodology of phenomenology in nursing research; a methodology that appears to be increasingly popular, evidenced by the increase in publications of phenomenological research studies in nursing literature. The reasons for its apparent rise in popularity are discussed below.

Utilising phenomenology as a methodology in nursing research is shaped by understandings of and approaches to nursing. Considering that phenomenology and nursing practice are both ontologically subjective, the two are congruous. A fundamental component of nursing is the holistic caring, advocating and support for the bio-psychosocial and spiritual well-being of

individuals, families, and communities. According to Wojnar and Swanson (2007), holistic nursing draws from traditional health care practices as well as nurses' and patients' emotions, health beliefs, values and experiences. Indeed, nursing considers the whole person and values their experience(s). Thus nursing, at its very essence, concerns itself with the nature of being, becoming, existence, and/or reality; all of which are subjective and embedded within lived experience.

The qualitative methodology known as phenomenology is thus an apt approach to inquiry by nurse researchers seeking to examine 'experience'. Particularly because the main focus in a phenomenological study is indeed, experience(s). Additionally nurses often relate to the main phenomenological approach to data collection, which is interviewing, because they may feel they already possess the necessary skills.

Nurses have a desire to understand a person's experience of health and healthcare so as to best care for them (Berkowitz, 2016). The phenomenological perspective, according to Pratt (2012), is of great value to nursing research because it enables researchers to understand the experiences of others in relation to health. The phenomenological perspective is also important to practice (Pratt 2012). Nurse researchers look to conduct research using approaches that are not producing incongruities with their philosophy of nursing; and personal experience(s) are central to both nursing practice and phenomenology. This is a perspective echoed by each of the themed articles. Indeed Morell-Scott (2017, pp. XX), in one of the themed articles, states 'phenomenological research in nursing as an approach has links to nursing, because, like nursing, it considers the whole person and values their experience'.

The articles of this issue explore and apply phenomenology to inquiry of the experience(s) of nurses and of clients. The article of Morell-Scott (2017) reviews the use of diaries as a method of data collection for phenomenological research of nurses and nursing practice. Diaries are presented as a means by which nurses and students may reflect on practice; and Morell-Scott (2017) describes the rich, deep research insight into personal experience(s) made possible by phenomenological study using diaries. Use of the diary provides the researcher with an insight and depth into experience(s), that otherwise may not be tapped. Phenomenological study in this context may be used to bring forth insight into personal experience(s) that would have otherwise been unheard.

The articles of Picton, Moxham and Patterson (2017, pp. XX) and Sumskis and Moxham (2017, pp. XX) explore phenomenology in the context of mental health nursing, and focus on the experience(s) of people with mental illness. They too explore the notion of phenomenology giving voice to people and their experience(s). Picton et al., (2017) present phenomenology as well positioned to ask how the lived experience is consciously reflected upon by people with a mental illness. Sumkis and Moxham's (2017) article demonstrates the use of the van Kaam's psychophenomenological method as an approach to analysis to interpret people's reflections on their experiences of schizophrenia. In both of these articles, phenomenology is presented as an approach to inquiry that gives voice to people with an experience of mental illness. Phenomenology, as situated in this instance privileges the voices of those who are traditionally not heard, aligning with intent, nursing research with ideologies of mental health recovery and mental health nursing.

The descriptive and explanatory nature of phenomenology embodies experiential meanings, as lived by individuals, and aligns with their understanding of their world. Utilising

phenomenology in nursing research therefore, augments nurse's understandings of the person's unique experiences and how they interpret them. The papers in this issue of *Nurse Researcher* enable us to see how the use of this methodology can facilitate a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of people important to nurses and nursing practice. Nurse researchers should not however, assume that phenomenology as a methodology is an easy option, nor should they assume that clinical interviewing skills translate readily to research interviewing skills but after an informed choice cognizant of an understanding of the different approaches in phenomenology, when a nurse researcher does indeed use phenomenology as a process for nursing inquiry, our practice is excellently elucidated.

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